

Mild stroke - consequences in everyday life, coping, and life satisfaction

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Abstract

Aim: The aim of this thesis was to explore the life situation one year after an apparently mild stroke, and to compare life satisfaction between patients and their spouses.

Method: Seventy-five patients with mild stroke participated. Neurological and cognitive impairment was assessed. Depression, post-stroke fatigue, concentration and memory problems, difficulties tolerating sounds and lights, stress sensitivity, irritability and other emotional changes, as well as problem solving abilities in everyday life, were delineated. An interview was conducted that treated experiences of stroke onset, health care and rehabilitation, perceived cognitive and emotional impairments and view of life and the future. Questions were posed about the consequences in everyday life and coping. The patients and their spouses estimated their life satisfaction. In the comparison of life satisfaction 56 couples participated.

Result: After one year 25 % experienced no changes in everyday life. Eighty % were independent in basic activities of daily living. The most common symptom was fatigability, reported by 72 %. More than 50 % experienced decreased stress tolerances and memory problems. Between 40 % and 50 % reported irritability, emotionalism, lack of initiative and concentration difficulties. Fatigability was associated with low satisfaction with life as a whole, leisure, daily occupation, sex life and social life.

The participants experienced that the stroke had changed them cognitively and emotionally so that they in part experienced themselves as another person. They felt uncertainty about the risk for a new stroke and their prognosis concerning recovery. Their symptoms were to some degree "hidden" and difficult to comprehend and communicate, they were often interpreted by others as being just psychological, and the border with normal function was unclear. Although they did not need physical assistance, the participants needed help and support, such as reminders, and help with planning and organising everyday life. In trying to cope with these difficulties the central experience was a feeling of uncertainty and of struggling. The coping efforts comprised individual, relational and environmental concerns. Life satisfaction was affected for both partners in the couple, although in somewhat different areas of life. Satisfaction with life as a whole, leisure and sex life were affected most, where 70%, 80% and 71% respectively, of both partners agreed in being dissatisfied.

Conclusion: This study stresses the importance of focusing on the life situation in a long-term perspective of individuals after a stroke that in the acute phase was apparently mild. The study shows that the problems experienced by these persons are often "hidden" and difficult to comprehend and communicate with others. This apparently mild stroke still had an effect on life satisfaction in both the patients and their spouses, after one year.

Key words: Stroke, mild stroke, cognition, post-stroke fatigue, qualitative method, coping, life satisfaction.

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This thesis is based on the following papers:

Paper I

Carlsson GE, Möller A, Blomstrand C. Consequences of mild stroke in persons < 75 years
- a 1-year follow up. *Cerebrovasc Dis* 2003;16:383-388.

Paper II

Carlsson GE, Möller A, Blomstrand C. A qualitative study of the consequences of "hidden
dysfunctions" one year after a mild stroke in persons <75 years.
Disabil Rehabil 2004;26:1373-1380.

Paper III

Carlsson GE, Möller A, Blomstrand C. Managing an everyday life of uncertainty - a
qualitative study of coping in persons with mild stroke. *Submitted*.

Paper IV

Carlsson GE, Forsberg-Wärleby G, Möller A, Blomstrand C. Comparison of life
satisfaction in couples one year after a partner's stroke. *In press. J Rehabil Med*.

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